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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the teaching of reading to secondary level and adult ineffective readers. The paper deals with the real costs of reading failures, the human frustration of not being able to read, and the role of reading in our society. It presents three brief studies of adults' inability to read; discusses ways of helping ineffective high school readers and teacher reaction to these individuals; the contribution of classroom teachers in all disciplines to reading improvement; the need for special reading programs; diagnostic procedures, the role of diagnosis, and the use of an informal reading inventory; teacher expectations and rebuilding pupil confidence; the personal development that can occur when students learn to read; and some conclusions that can be drawn from promising results with ineffective readers. (WR)

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OVERCOMING READING DIFFICULTIES AND THE EFFECT ON PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

Session

THURSDAY, MAY 2, 10:45 - 11:45 a.m.

ROOMS L, M, N, Marriott

CS 000 979

"When I started school I felt as if I was in a room with lots of windows which looked out on my world. Each year I stay, it feels as if more and more blinds are being pulled down. I am increasingly being shut out of a world that my friends seem to enjoy seeing into."

This comment made to us by a sixteen year old suggests the increasing sense of alienation felt by the ineffective reader.

We shall use the term "ineffective reader" as meaning one who, for whatever reason, cannot read well enough to understand and remember print at the level he is expected to work.

Real costs of reading failures

The results of failure to learn to read are not confined only to the obvious ones of low grades and limited options. They represent an appalling waste of teacher time and effort and energy. For the student, they represent, as Bormuth (1) describes it, "an irreplaceable fraction of his life, a fraction of his life that has value to him to the extent that he could be using it to produce other things that would also be satisfying to him." Continued uncorrected failure will limit his contribution to society of those benefits he might reasonably have expected to make. The dropout also adds a disproportionate percentage to the social burdens of welfare payments and crime which affect all society. In an age when accountability is the moot word, who wishes to be held accountable for deficits such as those?

The real consequences are not half-measured by statistics of wasted time and money. They are measured in individual, human frustration, in futile attempts at coming to terms with blighted hopes, in the agonies of seeing oneself a failure in the use of one of the basic tools of communication with one's world.

Philip H. Ennis (3) reminded us of this three years ago, "The costs involved are great in terms of direct loss of productive manpower and even greater in the indirect costs of action - including costs from the welfare and prison systems, the two great nonremediers. But in human terms the loss is incalculable. Reading may not be the only way for people to use their history and literature to forge a strong social and personal identity, but it is one way and a way denied millions of people."

Modern technology has provided many other tools for learning besides books. Neil Postman may be convinced that the answer to the problem lies in achieving "multimedia literacy".

But it is obvious and is of immediate concern to us here that Postman's millenium has not come. As Leo Fay (4) remarked, "while reading may not necessarily be a prerequisite for learning, it certainly is a prerequisite for successful living in our society." It is even more a prerequisite for successful living in our schools. There are thousands in our high schools today who have stumbled along the path of print with bruised and weary feet. We must ask if there is not something that can be done to turn that path into a road leading to personal fulfillment. If, in doing so, the electronic or other media can contribute something worthwhile to help us succeed, all committed teachers will be grateful.

Non-reading adults

For us who can and do read, it is difficult to envisage life as a non-reader. To do so will help us measure the urgency of our task. Three actual recent encounters will illustrate the point.

A young man with a mixed French-English educational background came for help. His inability to read had caused him to drop out of school early. Nevertheless, his native wit and industry had permitted him to do commendable work in the manual tasks demanded by his job in a factory. His success had brought a proposal from his firm to send him on a course in electrical technology so he could advance in his work. Imagine his dilemma! Happily, his need coincided with the need of a young paraplegic to be useful as a tutor. Beginning with Laubach material and other basic matters and suitable texts on electricity, he opened up the door for the young man to become functionally literate and to accept his firm's offer. What was more interesting, was his eager extension of reading to more self-fulfilling matter. We were moved by his comment, "For years I bought the morning paper and sat on buses and subways folding and unfolding it, pretending to read. You can't imagine the thrill the first time I could read, 'Weather: sunny. High 75.' It was sunnier than they knew!" He is typical of millions who, in our rapidly changing technological era will need to adapt to many job changes in their lifetime. Ennis reminded us that "reeducation is necessary to handle the successive waves of illiteracy following each scientific and technological advance."

The second adult non-reader came from our family doctor. The young mother of three boys was near nervous collapse from the strain of hiding from them her inability to read as well as her boy in Grade One. She recounted what had been a traumatic experience of finally confessing to her husband her elaborate efforts to disguise from him

her illiteracy. It was hard to see why she had not learned earlier, so rapid was her progress. She now shares her family's reading and is being educated by proxy along with them. Her doctor reports that no further tranquilizers or pep pills are needed and puzzling physical disorders have disappeared. She represents the emotional cost of being unable to read.

The third non-reader is a very successful contractor in our city. If satisfaction is to be found in the wealth that can buy the electronic media by which one can teach oneself in Postman's world, how does one explain his request? Surrepitiously he relayed through several intermediaries a plea for someone to teach him to read. He personifies deeply hidden, but still latent feelings of a lack of personal fulfillment, in spite of financial success.

Non-reading high school students

Our main and immediate concern is with those still within our schools. They represent all age levels, every socio-economic group and many degrees of intelligence. The causes of their failure to read are as diverse as their personalities. It is important to remember that in many of our schools, they represent both those who cannot read and those true illiterates, those who can read but don't. In either case, the end result of not reading is not so very different. Indeed, when one seeks for ways of helping the two students, the one who cannot and the one who does not, finding the rather concrete tools which may help the first may be much less demanding than finding what will help the second. Helping him will demand all of our sensitivity and ingenuity, that by subtle and devious means we may find the key that unlocks an interest strong enough to help him involve himself in meaningful

reading. His non-involvement indicates that in his reading, once he had mastered the mechanics of word-recognition, nothing significant had happened to create interest, to arouse curiosity, to expand his horizons, to challenge his capabilities, to give him the sense of personal fulfillment. No wonder reading bored him. It is like spending ten years playing the Key of C over and over.

What are the consequences? They are evident in our students apathy or their bravado, their hopelessness or their belligerence. They may masquerade under the stolid indifference of the passive or scream aloud in the destructive negativism of the visible trouble-maker. None can deny their large contribution to the number of dropouts.

It is important to consider for a moment its special effect on the teen-aged student. While in elementary school he could compensate for his handicap by drawing more frequently on his immediate experience. Only in the intermediate years did what he studied begin to move much beyond his personal world in vocabulary and concepts. There too, the teacher was a more immediate and abiding source of help. Only latterly was he expected to be self-reliant in his search for knowledge. Besides, hope survived that the magic could still happen. Next year one would surely learn to read!

Arrived in secondary school he found that everyone assumed that the magic had in fact happened. His day became a succession of assignments from six or seven teachers. Other students carried little books in which these assignments were duly entered with the intention of reading them. His vision of two hours' struggle with the first one left little

enthusiasm even to copy down the third or fourth. To seem disinterested and to feel despairing took no effort at all. His internal response, too often went like this, "You're a young man now so don't let the panic show. Shrug it off, if you can. If you can't, you'd better distract the teacher or the rest of the class so they may not notice. Whatever you do, don't let them put you where you'll have to face your inability to cope. Better show them you couldn't care less! Doesn't anybody see I can't do it?"

Even he cannot measure what it really means. The born blind cannot know how much of colour and beauty lie about him nor the deaf know the sweetness of the music of joy and laughter and love beyond his silence. Arthur Eastman (2) rightly observes:

> My notion is old, totally unoriginal, and, I believe, absolutely valid. It is that literature renders, to the imagination, experience and so promotes self-awareness, sympathy, understanding, wisdom. Literature offers inexpensively the choices for which actuality exacts a higher, deeper price.
>
> And literature, to use again the ancient word, is mirror - not of potentiality but of actuality. It tells us of men and women, parents, children. It tells us of ourselves, the central facts. In hookey-playing Huck Finn, in exhibitionist Walter Mitty, in Howling Allen Ginsberg - in these and a thousand others I see, I know myself.
>
> It is banishment or access denied I want to talk about now: people whose growth through literature is stunted, who fail to see in its mirrors or enter its universes or partake of its banquet. For it is a fact - hard, bitter, and recognized - that many achieve literacy and stop, and that many achieve literacy, enroll in our guided tours of literature, and then, returned home, settle down illiterately before the television screen for the rest of their lives."

We need to see the extent of our students deprivation which he himself cannot measure.

Fortunately, increasingly in our country as in yours, many secondary teachers are aware and do care. The long-delayed and still little understood magic does happen, and many of the former failures do learn to read

satisfactorily. What are the factors which make for success and what is the effect on personal development?

Contribution of classroom teachers

Though we have not reached that utopia where every teacher sees himself as a teacher of reading, more, in all disciplines, are taking advantage of in-service and professional help to learn what they can do about reading in their subject. As they find out, they discover that they are more effective teachers of all their students.

Special reading programs

It is evident however that more time and effort must be spent than can be given by the subject-area teachers. For both the non-reader and the reluctant one, special reading programs, probably linked to the English department are needed.

There is a direct ratio between the degree to which attention can be given to the individual, and success, both in academic and personal terms. By high school so many emotional and behavioural factors have become interwoven that group work tends to widen the gaps. Permit us to speak from our personal experience. In a reading centre filled with a wide selection of print material or "software", cassettes and tape-recorders, a pacer or two, we find it possible to offer significant help to students on strictly individual programs. To eliminate any stigma and because we believe we owe it to them, we include material and work for our top-notch students also. Besides reading, part of each day's work is in writing and all follow instructions in developing listening skills.

Success factors

We should like to stress three factors which seem especially significant when considering work with high school students.

Diagnostic procedures

Diagnosis needs to have dimensions much broader than a search for statistics. A suitable standardized test provides important objective data on which to base one's discussion with the student. To place any great significance upon grade level interpretation of its results is both unproductive and unreliable. Most of the reading the student wants to do fits no specific grade. Besides, his ability to read is now so affected by his background experience and his interests that it can range over several grades, depending upon content.

The use of an informal reading inventory can be most helpful but again, not for establishing a grade level. Using, as a basis for the inventory, Ruth Strang's paragraphs and some selections from textbooks, the sensitive teacher can derive a wealth of information about the student's word attack, the level of his involvement and his strengths and weaknesses in unaided response to what he reads. Observant attention to him as he reads will yield significant clues to his image of himself as a reader.

The best possible source of information is the student himself. If he is treated as one whose opinion on the matter is of prime importance, he can present the most accurate clues for a suitable program. This interview should become the occasion for the hopeful resurrection of those long-buried dreams and ambitions on which we must draw for the

incentive and sustaining patience required in the very real struggle to which we want him to commit himself. The subtle compliment you pay him is more significant than you can measure and can be the first step towards the commitment he makes to whatever effort is required. Similarily, in the choice and adjustment of program and material, it is vital that he be involved in the decisions.

Teacher expectations

Nowhere is the teacher's conviction and expectation that improvement will ensue so important as in the task of rebuilding confidence damaged by years of failure. No dissimulation can be tolerated. Hypocrisy here would be both cruel and tragic. If the right steps are taken, teacher and student alike have a right to expect that marks will begin to go up. Improvement in self-respect and behaviour follow.

Link with other subject areas

To ensure that gains are carried over to other studies, frequent application to current assignments is recommended. Such linking also offers the chance to establish another crucial ingredient - the tailored, meaningful, consistent challenge which eliminates boredom, the curse of too many reading programs.

Such a view establishes some guidelines as to the approach taken and the materials used. Where possible, the basic skills of word attack, and meaning from context, and study skills, are more effectively taught from selections in which he can become interested. Here, his familiarity with the structure of his language and its meaning, and his background knowledge

of the content facilitate identification of unknown words, once he has learned to hazard the necessary guess. For instance, one of our more successful tools for teaching many basic skills has been a reading and study guide we wrote for the Automobile Association manual, How to Drive. One can insert specific work in more advanced skills which grow out of the difficulties he encounters in such material. The prime concern is that every reading activity should be as closely linked as possible to meaning. For instance, we find the SRA Reading for Understanding our best tool for vocabulary development of abstract and advanced words, since the words are studied to satisfy an immediate need.

Another important criterion should be this - whatever the selection he is reading, for whatever purpose, it should be making its worthwhile contribution to the store of long-denied knowledge which he must bring to each new reading encounter. Spelling this principle out to him often adds incentive to the immediate task. A non-achieving Grade Seven student who began by reading and discussing with us a selection on storms found it the first step which has since led him into meteorological studies at the university.

Effects on personal development

Need we elaborate on the changes that occur, first within the student, and then in his responses to what are to him new opportunities to learn? Dreams long blurred take on new focus. In turn, this gives new meaning to subject matter. Growing knowledge of his world and of himself expands into a curiosity about the lives of others, past and present. The blinds

begin to go up at his touch. He has begun to acquire a basic ingredient for independence. Who wouldn't be accountable for that?

Significance for educational authorities

We have no panacea and we do not achieve one hundred per cent success. The problems, the student, and life itself are too complex for that. If promising results are possible among even a fair proportion of our students at secondary school, surely more widespread attention should be paid to the possibilities. What conclusions can we draw?

First, the work offers a challenge to our best teachers, those who can be accepting of students with problems, without abdicating their role of leadership. In our country this requires opportunity for serious studies in all aspects of both language competency and human growth. We are only now beginning to provide this for secondary teachers.

Secondly, ministry of education officials need to consider both the need for and the possible parameters of credit programs which will provide the opportunity for maturing young people to learn what has previously eluded them.

Finally, boards of education and administrative personnel need to count the cost of freeing keen teachers to do this job. They should weigh the cost against the financial, social and emotional toll enacted by accumulative failures. It seems insane to expand capital costs of buildings and equipment, to meet increasing expenditures for staff, unless we set free to benefit from it all, as many as possible of those whose inability to read hitherto made vain so much of our effort.

All we have said is summed up in the lovely poem of Virginia Svagr printed in a recent Journal of Reading.

THE NON-READER

The boy I saw was seventeen.
He laughed; he talked:
He seemed to see,
And yet he could not read
so deprived was he
That all the world seemed flat and
stale.

He came for help
To see as others see,
To find the splendor
That is there in print.

What to do with such as he?
If we but stop and think
And love and care,
We find the way.
To read, this boy must also love--
Himself, the book, the world.

Virginia Svagr

"The Non-Reader". The Reading Teacher, vol. 23, no. 8 (May 1970), p. iv.

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